



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

August 11, 2017

Jerusalem Post

TV Poll: 'Only 33% Believe Netanyahu is Innocent'

Prime Minister Netanyahu's address to Likud on Wednesday did not succeed in persuading the public of his innocence, according to a poll taken for Channel 1 on Thursday. The poll found that only 33% of Israelis believe Netanyahu is innocent, among whom 25% said they somewhat believe in his innocence and only 8% said they strongly believed he was innocent. Two-thirds said they do not believe he is innocent, including 29% who said they did not believe at all, and 38% who said they somewhat did not believe. Asked whether the speech strengthened or weakened their belief in Netanyahu's innocence, 8% said it strengthened it, 2% said it weakened it, 46% said their opinion remained unchanged. See also, ["Poll: 48% of Israelis don't believe there's an 'obsessive and unprecedented hunt' against Netanyahu" \(JOnline\)](#)

Times of Israel

Ex-Diplomats: PM's Trouble Hardly Affect Trump's Peace Push

With the heat on Prime Minister Netanyahu intensifying by the day, there is a new shroud of uncertainty surrounding one of the key players in US President Donald Trump's quest to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace. According to two veteran US diplomats with extensive experience working on the Israeli-Palestinian file, Netanyahu's legal situation is not something that disrupts America's peace efforts. "The administration has to take this seriously, but it's not like it's going to derail anything that they're locked into at this time," says David Makovsky, a Middle East peace negotiator during the Barack Obama administration. Likewise, Aaron David Miller said that without a "framework for negotiations," if a key figure were to exit the stage, nothing would really be lost.

Reuters

Israel Warns Hamas Not to Try to Foil its Anti-Tunnel Wall

Israel warned Gaza's Hamas rulers on Thursday not to try to foil its construction of a border wall designed to stop tunnels between the two sides. It said it had mapped militant emplacements hidden under civilian sites in the Palestinian enclave that may be attacked in any new war. Hamas accused Israel of belligerence. The unusually detailed Israeli threat followed a rocket launch on Tuesday which caused no damage in Israel and went unclaimed by Gazan groups. Israel responded with an air strike on a Hamas facility that medics said wounded seven people. Such flare-ups have been relatively rare since the last Gaza war, in 2014, with Hamas mostly holding fire and reining in smaller militant factions. See also, ["Israel to spend \\$800m on underground Gaza wall" \(The Times\)](#)

I24 News

Iranian Journalist Seeking Asylum Finds Refuge in Israel

An Iranian journalist threatened with deportation from Turkey and facing the death penalty in her home country of Iran for, landed safely in Israel Thursday after being granted asylum in the Jewish state earlier this week. Neda Amin, who has written blogs in Persian for the *Times of Israel*, a news website, was approved entry by Israel's interior minister in response to a request by the Jerusalem Journalists Association and the National Journalists Association who claimed her life was in danger for her journalistic work. See also, ["Iranian Journalist Facing Death Penalty Arrives In Israel Seeking Asylum" \(Forward\)](#)

Israel, Jordan, PA to Hold First Joint Firefighting Exercise

Israel will join Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, as well as three European countries, for a first-of-its-kind joint drill of their emergency services. According to the Israel Hayom newspaper, the Middle East Forest Fire exercise, or MEFF, is slated to take place from October 22 to 26 in Jordan and Israel, and will include rescue forces from Italy, France, Spain and Croatia. The exercise will test the capacity of all sides to cooperate in major rescue operations, including a focus on firefighting, rescues from collapsed buildings and other emergency situations. The planning stage of the exercise is set to take place in Jordan before the field training begins in Israel. See also, ["Security cooperation with Israel to resume 'gradually,' PA official says" \(TOI\)](#)

AP

PA President Abbas Curbs Social Media Freedom in Decree

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has clamped down on social media and news websites - the main outlets for debate and dissent in the West Bank - with a vaguely worded decree that critics say allows his government to jail anyone on charges of harming "national unity" or the "social fabric." Rights activists say the edict, issued without prior public debate last month, is perhaps the most significant step yet by Abbas' government to restrict freedom of expression in the autonomous Palestinian enclaves of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. A Palestinian prosecutor denied the decree is being used to stifle dissent and insisted that a new law on electronic crimes was needed to close legal loopholes that in the past allowed offenders, such as hackers, to go unpunished. See also, ["Abbas Cracks Down on Social Media, News Sites" \(Voice of America\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Police May Stop Protests at Attorney General's House

Police will consider whether to allow the weekly demonstration next to Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit's home, following a request by Petah Tikva's Deputy Mayor Uriel Bosso (Shas). If it will take place this Saturday night, it will be the 38th consecutive such protest in the city, calling on the attorney-general to indict Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In June, the High Court decided these protests are legal, but Bosso says the nature of the rallies have changed since then. From small protests of dozens, they became events attracting thousands, both for and against Netanyahu. The new conditions are harming the residents of the area, said Bosso. A police spokesman told *the Jerusalem Post* that as for now, police have not made a decision on this matter yet and there are no policy changes. See also, ["Barak: Netanyahu support rally was 'pathetic performance of whining'" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Ynet News

New Israeli Air Force Commander Sworn In

Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin officially succeeded Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel as commander of the Israeli Air Force in a ceremony held on Thursday evening. The ceremony was attended and conducted by Minister of Defense Avigdor Lieberman, Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot and other members of the IDF General Staff. Norkin, who previously served as head of the Planning Directorate, replaced Eshel, who had served as head of the IAF for the past five years and will be discharged from the IDF after more than 40 years of service.

A Knight for a King

By Nahum Barnea, Columnist for Yediot Ahronot

- Tova Tzimuki, *Yedioth Ahronoth's* legal affairs correspondent, taught me a fascinating lesson about the process that detectives undergo. At a certain point, she explained, the attorney deciding on the case reaches the point of no return. He has to go forward. Mandelblit may have reached this point in dealing with the Netanyahus.
- I will try to expand on this. When I look back, to the evolution of the Olmert cases, to Aryeh Deri's past cases, to Lieberman's cases, perhaps even the Katsav case, I observe the same pattern. A stage comes in which the detective stops seeing the person under investigation as a legitimate public figure and begins to regard him as a criminal. A criminal must stand trial and be punished. Any other outcome will be considered a terrible failure, a mortal blow to the rule of law.
- Think about the attorney general, Meni Mazuz, and the state attorney, Moshe Lador, and the decisions they made in the Olmert case. They would not have dared to bring Talansky for a preliminary testimony, a testimony that was explained by questionable claims, had they not become convinced that Olmert was a criminal. He did not enjoy the presumption of innocence—not in their eyes.
- I think I can identify that point: The moment in which the attorney general decides to sign a state's witness agreement. A state's witness is a criminal whose offenses can be proven—otherwise he would not have agreed to confess to offenses and inform on others. In chess terms, the state is willing to sacrifice a knight for a king.
- The question of who the knight is in this game and who the king is, remains open. It is easier to decide the question when it comes to crime families; it is more difficult when it comes to public figures. Ari Harow became entangled in criminal actions. It does not matter what his associates say—he agreed as part of the deal he signed to admit that he had committed criminal offenses. The question is whether [the information] he brings outweighs in severity what he did himself. Otherwise, it is doubtful whether it is justified to exempt him from punishment.
- As soon as Mandelblit decided to sign the deal with Harow, he entered into what [Ariel] Sharon used to call the *corrales* [literally, the bull pen leading to the bullfighting arena]—a course of action from which it is very difficult to withdraw. If he closes the Netanyahu cases, the question will be asked, why did you exempt Harow from punishment; he has to go all the way.
- Such affairs are conducted in parallel on three levels, at different paces. The investigation is conducted slowly. Every person questioned adds information that requires [the police] to summon more people for questioning or to re-question those who were already interviewed. The State Attorney's Office knows that it is dealing with a very strong rival, enveloped in attorneys and money. He cannot be arrested, it is very difficult to dictate a timetable to him. It wants to play it safe—to pick up every stone, to ask every person. The months turn into years.

- The second level is the political level. It has a pace of its own. The political establishment seethes with activity. Some fear elections and some are in a rush. The prime minister's standing weakens. He operates under pressure. His performance is impaired.
- There have been two examples of this recently: Netanyahu's decision to disseminate his pictures embracing the security guard who shot and killed a person in Jordan, and the hasty decision to place metal detectors at the gates to the Temple Mount; backing down from this decision cost Netanyahu votes within the right wing. Netanyahu should have known better.
- A prime minister can mobilize against the investigations the political establishment and his supporters. That is what Netanyahu is trying to do now. In his speech on Wednesday he leveled accusations at the media and the left wing, but in effect he was speaking to the officers in the Lahav 433 Unit, to the attorneys on Salah al-Din Street and to the people who will yet be questioned. He was making clear to them that they would become the enemies of the people.
- The third level is the media. The pace on this track is dizzying. The headlines are alarming and confusing. They talk about suspicions, but give the impression that guilt has already been proven. There a long road that leads there.
- There is no way to synchronize the three paces. The result could be problematic: endless investigations, a prime minister who finds it difficult to function, and media that strews headlines in the wind. As Churchill said on another matter, "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

SUMMARY: As soon as Mandelblit decided to sign the deal with Harow, he entered into what [Ariel] Sharon used to call the *corrales* [literally, the bull pen leading to the bullfighting arena]—a course of action from which it is very difficult to withdraw. If he closes the Netanyahu cases, the question will be asked, why did you exempt Harow from punishment; he has to go all the way. A prime minister can mobilize against the investigations the political establishment and his supporters. That is what Netanyahu is trying to do now. In his speech on Wednesday he leveled accusations at the media and the left wing, but in effect he was speaking to the officers in the Lahav 433 Unit, to the attorneys on Salah al-Din Street and to the people who will yet be questioned. He was making clear to them that they would become the enemies of the people.

Israel's Getting a New Wall, This One With a Twist

By Isabel Kershner, Israel and PA correspondent at The New York Times

- **Israel is building another wall to protect itself from its enemies. But rather than a major eyesore, much of this one will be invisible. In the coming months, military officials say, the army will be accelerating construction of a subterranean barrier around the Gaza Strip, designed to cut off tunnels running beneath the border into Israel like the ones Hamas militants used to ambush Israeli military posts during the summer-long war of 2014.**
- **Challenged by hostile forces on most of its fronts, Israel is already pretty much walled in. Aboveground fences and sections of concrete wall run along and through parts of the West Bank, a legacy of Palestinian suicide bombings during the second intifada. Formidable steel fences also stretch along the northern frontiers with Lebanon and Syria, the southern borders with Jordan and the Egyptian Sinai, and around Gaza, the isolated Palestinian coastal enclave controlled for the past decade by Hamas, the Islamic militant group.**
- **The approach seems to have caught on internationally. President Trump invoked Israel's "wall" — without specifying which one — as a model for the barrier he has vowed to build along the United States' border with Mexico. And the migrant crisis has spurred European interest in Israeli fence-building techniques.**
- **Israeli military officials are being understandably cagey about how the new underground barrier will work, other than to say it will also include an aboveground section and incorporate layers of advanced technological systems. The cost is expected to be about 4 billion shekels (more than \$1 billion), according to Israeli news reports, which suggest it will plunge to a depth of about 130 feet.**
- **Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir, the commander of the military's Southern Command, told reporters this week that it would be completed within about two years. In the meantime, the Israeli military is working to ensure that the project does not prompt the next war.**
- **Military commanders are insisting that the wall is meant only to defend Israelis, and emphasizing that it will be built in Israeli territory, in the hope of removing any justification for Hamas to attack the construction teams and set off another round of fighting. On Thursday, nearly three years after the end of the last devastating war, military officials distributed aerial photographs and GPS coordinates of two residential buildings in Gaza that they said concealed entrances to Hamas tunnel networks.**
- **General Zamir said those buildings would become legitimate military targets in wartime, endangering the occupants. One of the buildings is six stories high and went up in the last two years, according to the military, while the other is home to a Hamas member with five children, and connects to a nearby mosque. They were, he said, just two examples of "a whole bank of targets." "We see that Hamas is deterred and restrained, and is reining in others," General Zamir told reporters in a telephone briefing. But, he added, "Our intelligence shows without**

any doubt that Hamas is building its infrastructure for the next round of fighting in the civilian arena.”

- Relative calm has prevailed along the border since the 2014 war, which was the third between Israel and Hamas in six years. But General Zamir said the situation was “potentially explosive,” and could deteriorate at any moment.
- Israel’s technologically advanced army invested heavily to combat Hamas’s lower-tech weapons. Israel developed the Iron Dome air defense system to knock out the crude rockets Hamas and other militant groups fired at its cities. Faced with the precision of Iron Dome, Hamas went underground and focused on building tunnels.
- Hamas officials insisted they would not be fazed by Israel’s subterranean wall. “The threats of the occupation do not frighten the resistance,” Hazim Kassim, a Hamas spokesman, said in an interview on Thursday, referring to Israel. He added, “Judging by previous experience, the resistance will find ways to overcome these obstacles.”
- The army’s publicity campaign follows a three-month pilot project on an initial part of the new barrier. About 1,000 civilian contract workers will be involved in the construction. In 2014, after 50 days of fighting, Israel said it had put dozens of Hamas tunnels out of commission, including several extending into Israeli territory, threatening nearby civilian communities. Some had been used to attack soldiers.
- Israel says Hamas has since worked feverishly to rehabilitate and expand its tunnels and stock of rockets, even as Gazans suffer a continual humanitarian crisis, including a dire lack of electricity in a scorching summer. To contend with the challenges of underground warfare, Israeli soldiers now use virtual-reality systems to simulate fighting in tunnels and train in mazelike, concrete tunnel networks constructed to mimic those in Gaza.
- On a recent weekday at the Sirkin Army base in central Israel, about a dozen soldiers from a special combat engineering unit donned virtual-reality headsets in a classroom as trainers walked them through a simulation. They virtually filed through a narrow tunnel, one behind the other. With the flip of a switch they could fill the tunnel with misty fumes or bathe it in the green light of night vision. At one turn, they came across a virtual Hamas militant digging in fatigues and a red-checked kaffiyeh. The military’s showcasing of such training to reporters is all part of the psychological warfare Israel and Hamas have been engaged in for years.
- In an interview at the Sirkin base, Brig. Gen. Oshri Lugassy, the departing chief engineering officer, said that there were now “hundreds of kilometers” of tunnels running under the Gaza Strip. Since 2014, when the extent of the underground challenge was exposed, the engineering corps has acquired dozens more heavy mechanical tools, drills and bulldozers, he said.
- Israeli residents of areas bordering the Gaza Strip have long complained of hearing the Hamas tunnel diggers at night. By now, General Lugassy said, his engineers have earned “a doctorate in noises.” He said most of the “digging” people heard turned out to be a storeroom door slamming in the wind or even a small creature that munches on grass roots. Still, “if you hear it at night,” he acknowledged, “you are convinced they are digging under your house.”

SUMMARY: Israel is building another wall to protect itself from its enemies. But rather than a major eyesore, much of this one will be invisible. In the coming months, military officials say, the army will be accelerating construction of a subterranean barrier around the Gaza Strip, designed to cut off tunnels running beneath the border into Israel like the ones Hamas militants used to ambush Israeli military posts during the summer-long war of 2014. Challenged by hostile forces on most of its fronts, Israel is already pretty much walled in. Aboveground fences and sections of concrete wall run along and through parts of the West Bank, a legacy of Palestinian suicide bombings during the second intifada. Formidable steel fences also stretch along the northern frontiers with Lebanon and Syria, the southern borders with Jordan and the Egyptian Sinai, and around Gaza, the isolated Palestinian coastal enclave controlled for the past decade by Hamas, the Islamic militant group.